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OO RUEHHM RUEHJO
DE RUEHPF #0814/01 1211011

ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 011011Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6551
INFO RUEHXI/LABOR COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHDT/AMEMBASSY DILI IMMEDIATE 0007
RUEHC/DEPT OF LABOR WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA IMMEDIATE 1416

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PHNOM PENH 000814

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/IL
DILI FOR VISITING EAP DAS ERIC JOHN
GENEVA FOR RMA

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PHUM ELAB PGOV CB
SUBJECT: CAMBODIA: WORKERS MARCH DESPITE POLICE
INTERVENTION

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¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY. A Labor Day march with more than 1,000 workers proceeded peacefully despite the brief and detention by police of union leader Chea Mony, police checkpoints at roads leading into the capital, and unconfirmed reports of isolated clashes between police and workers elsewhere in the city. Last week, the Phnom Penh municipal government denied union leaders' request for permission to hold the march, but union leaders vowed to proceed anyway. While denying permission for the march and police intervention were regrettable, Chea Mony's release and the subsequent decision to allow a modified march demonstrate that the government has learned to moderate its response to public protest. END SUMMARY.

March Proceeds Despite Detention, Barricades

¶12. (U) Two pro-opposition unions, the Free Trade Union of the Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia (FTU) and the Cambodian Independent Teachers Association (CITA), applied for permission to hold a Labor Day march in Phnom Penh from the National Assembly to Wat Langka and back to the National Assembly. The Phnom Penh municipality denied their request last week, citing potential confusion caused by an already planned rally by the pro-government Cambodian Confederation of Trade Unions (CCTU) at the National Assembly. FTU leader Chea Mony and CITA leader Rong Chhun vowed to go ahead with plans for the march without permission.

¶13. (U) Early on the morning of May 1, police surrounded FTU headquarters and also reportedly blocked major roads into Phnom Penh, refusing to allow pick-up trucks carrying workers into the city, but allowing the workers to proceed on foot or motorcycle taxi. At about 8:30 a.m., FTU president Chea Mony was detained by police at FTU headquarters and taken first to the Russei Keo police station and then to Phnom Penh municipal police headquarters. The police did not present an arrest warrant. Two FTU staff members, an International Labor Organization (ILO) representative, and a representative from the United Nations Cambodia Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNCOHCHR) were present at police headquarters, but were not allowed to observe Chea Mony's meeting with police. Police also reportedly told Chea Mony that he could not have a lawyer present. After approximately two hours, Chea Mony signed a letter promising

a modified march route from FTU headquarters to Wat Langka (near the site of union leader Chea Vichea's assassination two years ago) and back to the FTU, was released, and joined the march in progress. There are no charges currently pending against him.

¶4. (U) After receiving word of Chea Mony's release and the agreement, CITA leader Rong Chhun led more than 1,000 workers from FTU headquarters to Wat Langka. There, Rong Chhun, opposition party leader Sam Rainsy, human rights activist Kem Sokha, and Chea Mony spoke to the crowd, calling for increased freedom of expression, protection for workers' rights, increased salaries for teachers and garment factory workers, and lower gasoline taxes. Sam Rainsy led the workers back to FTU headquarters, where the crowd disbursed.

¶5. (U) In public remarks at a separate Labor Day rally organized by the human rights organization ADHOC, Econoff expressed regret at Chea Mony's detention and reminded the assembled crowd that freedom of assembly was guaranteed under the Cambodian constitution.

Unconfirmed Reports of Clashes Elsewhere

¶6. (U) In addition to the brief detention of Chea Mony and police checkpoints entering the city, union leaders and NGO activists have also made unconfirmed reports of isolated clashes between workers wanting to join the march and police at several locations throughout the city. In some cases, police are alleged to have beaten or used electric batons or water cannons to subdue workers, although there are no reports of serious injuries.

Disagreement Among Top Ministry of Interior Officials?

¶7. (SBU) According to the unconfirmed account of one police

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officer, top Ministry of Interior (MOI) officials failed to reach an agreement about how to deal with the protesters and gave contradictory orders. Interior Minister Sar Kheng decided to allow the march after speaking with Sam Rainsy on the phone in the morning. However, National Police Commissioner General Hok Lundy disagreed with this decision, and ordered his officers to establish checkpoints and prevent pick-up trucks from entering the capital.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) While still restricting freedom of assembly, the Cambodian government seems to be learning how to moderate its reaction to unwelcome public protest. Whereas last fall's criticism of the border treaty and critical comments on a banner at a Human Rights Day rally landed several union and human rights activists in jail, this unauthorized march was allowed to proceed, albeit after a brief detention of one of its organizers. While hardly action to be applauded, it is noteworthy that the MOI negotiated with the opposition to permit the march, and government reaction could have been far more extreme. END COMMENT.

STORELLA